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# MODERN LANGUAGE NOTES.

**Baltimore, February, 1888.**

## *MATTER AND MANNER IN LITERARY COMPOSITION.*

It is not without reflection that I put the conjunction *and* between the two principal words of the title of this paper. That conjunction strikes the key-note of what the paper will try to say, namely, that, since every literary product necessarily has manner as well as matter, as necessarily no literary product is worthy of unreserved commendation, unless in it not only matter, but manner also, is adequately attended to. In no other form would the title have said this. "Manner as opposed to matter" would have implied to a greater or less extent an incompatibility between the terms; while any other expression that readily suggests itself would have involved a notion of at least the inferiority of one or the other element of the composition. In fact, however, the terms are interpenetrating and mutually dependent; it being a truism that matter can not exist without form nor form without matter.

A discussion of style, then, that proceeds in forgetfulness of this mutual dependence of form and content, necessarily shoots wide of the mark. And yet it was exactly this dependence that a recent discussion seemed to me to forget. In the late Modern Language Convention, a paper by President Shepherd, of Charleston College, on the English of Lord Macaulay, provoked a deal of caustic criticism, unfair, I believe, because one-sided. Never before, perhaps, was Macaulay assigned so hopelessly low a place on the roll of English prose authors. Professor Hart, of Cincinnati, who said that Macaulay always seemed to him to write as if some one were looking over his shoulder and saying, "Bravo! Lord Macaulay; how well you have turned that sentence;"\* Professor Hunt, of Princeton, who declared that he had yet to receive from Macaulay the slightest intellectual stimulus;—both ignored, as it seems to me, this fundamental principle of the inseparability, except in thought, of matter and form in literary composition, both

spoke as if the only merit in composition were its expressing worthy thought. Professor Hunt did, indeed, confess that about no other writer had such widely different opinions been expressed, and that the nearly unbounded popularity Macaulay had attained was certainly a sign of some power in him; but it was left for another speaker to remind the Convention of the indissoluble bond between form and content; while even he damned the illustrious Englishman with faint praise by saying (in effect) that his style was an excellent poison with which to inoculate beginners against the more dreadful forms of "fine writing."

Now Macaulay's case is, of course, but one instance under the principle; and the discussion intended here is of the principle, not of any concrete instance of it. Let us grant, then, freely the many defects of Macaulay both in thought and in style. President Shepherd undoubtedly praised him over much; his weaknesses are patent, and need not even be specified. They lie on the very face of his style; his brilliancy itself making them glare at us the more rudely and insist the more strongly on being observed. But has Macaulay, therefore, no points of excellence? Is only the novice, never the practised critic, impressed by him? Or, to put the question more broadly, is there no merit in a fine style? Is such a style necessarily bad? Are we to attend only to the thought of a composition? Is it not, rather, manifestly unfair to single out a writer's defects, however glaring they are, and dwell on them, holding them so close to our eyes the meanwhile that we can not see his excellences at all?—can not see the woods for the trees, as the German proverb has it? Granted that we outgrow such a writer as Macaulay; what is it that we outgrow? Surely not his clearness, not his power of calling for us spirits from the vasty deep, not his admirable choice of words, not any of the merits of his style. Why, then, should we not gratefully recognize these merits and confess them elements of a real and true success? On the other hand, we do tire of the inherent contradiction between these excellences of

\*Quoted from memory.

form and the writer's too evident failure to maintain his thought at a correspondingly high standard. Such brilliancy of style has a right to exist only as growing naturally out of a correspondingly brilliant body of thought; and the critic is fairly entitled to say so. But he is manifestly unfair when he says this without conceding the other truth; when he holds the writer up to ridicule as posing before a looking-glass and saying, "Ah, you handsome dog!" when, in fact, though the writer is a bit self-conscious, he really gives us something fine to look at.

Suppose, for example, that Macaulay had thought as Carlyle thought. Would the brilliancy of his style in that case have offended us? Nay, would not his many charms of manner, unimpaired as they would then have been, only have added to his legitimate effect upon us? We were told in the Convention that Carlyle first wrote as Macaulay did, but afterwards deliberately changed his style. But why? Was it not because he believed that, by intentionally adopting the peculiarities that characterize his later work, he would the more certainly secure an audience? Surely, there was never a more conceited, self-conscious great man than Carlyle. *Vice versa*, suppose that Carlyle's style had remained more finished. Would his influence have been less? Nay, is it not despite his crudities, his "Babylonian dialect," as Alexander Everett called it, that he influences us at all?—despite that boisterousness and utter want of self-containment which have secured for him the epithet *megalosaurian*? Or, let us take some examples nearer home. Surely, the charm of the *Mosses from an Old Manse* and the sustained interest of *The House of the Seven Gables* are no whit the less because of Hawthorne's almost matchless literary form? On the other hand, Mr. Marion Crawford is not at all a great novelist—great as Thackeray or Dickens or even Bulwer is great. Yet Mr. Crawford's style makes many a passage in his works easy that would otherwise be the roughest sailing; nay, more, it furnishes us throughout his writings with one legitimate object of admiration, even where the body of thought is of a texture too light to be valued for itself.

Not that I would champion mere manner.

When a man has nothing to say, by all means let him say it—as the familiar epigram warns us; but when he has something to say, why shall he not say it as well as he can? What do Professor McMaster's cross-section pictures of American life in 1789 lose by being painted in the brightest colors? Or what does Carlyle gain by his eccentricities of style? If a writer's only true object is to influence his age or succeeding ages, if the man of letters should be (in Carlyle's own phrase) a prophet, what shall he gain by conciliating, as Carlyle has done, only a small audience? Granted that Carlyle's audience is select, if small: he has offended multitudes whom he might have taught, and so has lost no small part of his proper influence. What a power his writings might have wielded, couched in a different style! Or, to take another example, which of the two famous passages in Milton's *Areopagitica* has exerted the greater force in human thinking, that in which a tradesman is described as committing his religion to his pastor for safe-keeping, while he himself is devoted to his trade, or that in which Truth is pictured as hewn, like Osiris, into a thousand pieces, while her sad friends, like Isis, make careful search for her members? Both passages express worthy thought, thought often dwelt upon in our own times; both rise above the plain style of ordinary prose; each contains a figure of speech worked out to its utmost limits. But the style of the first passage is affected almost to awkwardness; and the truth it contains is to-day re-expressed by our own writers in many different ways. The second passage, inimitable and almost unprose-like as it is, nevertheless impresses the most casual reader, and is quoted daily from a score of commonplace-books. Its delicate style has kept it sweet through all the ages.

Once more, why is it that Milton's prose or the prose of Sir Thomas Browne is so little read to-day? To say that Milton's poetry overshadows his prose, or that the topics on which he wrote are no longer "living" topics of thought, is no reason why the *Urn Burial* or the *Religio Medici* should not be known. Sir Thomas Browne wrote no verse; and a more profitable book even for our study than the *Urn Burial* might be looked for in vain.

Its inverted and otherwise un-modern style alone seals it from all but a select few readers.

The truth, then, would seem to be as stated in my opening paragraph, that both a good style and a worthy body of thought are necessary to the ideally perfect composition. This certainly was George Saintsbury's opinion when, in February 1876, he printed in the *Fortnightly Review* his paper *Modern English Prose*, a paper in which, lamenting the prevailing neglect and consequent decay of English prose style, he declares this decay not "a mere isolated fact," but "a change which has affected English Literature to a degree and in a manner worthy of the most serious consideration." The fine old English style, he hints, has gone out with the fine old English gentleman, till, in this ultra democratic age, a certain coarseness of manner is as noticeable in literary composition as it is in the conduct of people who profess themselves of the *beau monde*. Mr. Saintsbury actually describes the symptoms of this change, details its causes, and lays down the duty of the critic in view of it; showing by his earnestness and the minute attention he gives the subject, how real and how serious he considers the phenomenon to be.

The opposite opinion, however, has no little vogue. Buffon's doctrine that style is the man himself is interpreted by many teachers to mean that the individuality of a writer is expressed only in his thought; that we are to know an author solely by the opinions he expresses. That the foot of Hercules,—or rather his hand,—shall also betray him, seems to these critics an incredible idea; and their depreciation of form, of style in this its truest sense, grows in proportion. Less and less attention is paid to how an author writes, more and more to what he says. Worse than this, perhaps, the very springs of our literary supply are left unfilled; until, in the mid-winter dearth that would seem to be threatening us, we shall have only to deplore our insensate folly in neglecting the precautions that might—doubtless would—have secured us springs filled to overflowing. The study of rhetoric and criticism is too much neglected by us. Language studies are too often only philological; or, at best, the student is left to acquire a good style by "absorption." Cer-

tain worthy writers are put before him; their biography, the history of their times, the history of literature in general, are taught him; but the fundamental truths according to which the authors are good here and bad there, are not taught him. Even questions of grammatical purity are treated as of little value, and, with the weightier matters of sentence and paragraph building, unity of composition, clearness, force, and other such topics, are hustled out of court in quiet contempt.

Even professed English scholars give us some extraordinary examples of this neglect of manner in their hot pursuit of excellent matter. Thus, from a recently published book on English prose literature I extract the following curious fagots of crooked sticks:—

"Then follows, *The Chronicle*, compiled, partly, by Alfred, and partly, by Plegimund and other less known annalists. This collection, unimportant as it is in itself or in its literary character, is invaluable in its historical and civil bearings. Beginning long before the Conquest, it runs nearly a century beyond it and thus serves to cherish the First-English spirit and language. As the earliest history of any Teutonic people in a Teutonic language, and with the *Laws* the earliest form of English Prose, it has an interest and [a] value quite aside from its contents. Alfred did for it [what? the *Chronicle* or "the earliest form of English Prose" the *Chronicle* embodies?] what Chaucer did for English Poetry. He made it [?] national, so that from his time to the death of Stephen it [?] was the people's authority. Above all, it [?] was English clear and clean and lies back of all later English as a basis and guide."<sup>1</sup>

Could anything be more inartistic, unless, indeed, it is the same author's constant practice of referring to headings on his page by mere demonstratives, and of thus making these headings part of his text? For example, treating of Dr. Johnson's style, he writes,

"*This*<sup>2</sup> is one of the first features that impress the reader as he studies *this* [?]<sup>3</sup> prose structure and diction and it becomes more manifest as the perusal goes on."

<sup>1</sup> The italics, I need hardly say, are mine.

<sup>2</sup> "Its Anglo-Latin Element."

<sup>3</sup> The context does not make this pronoun clear.

*This*<sup>4</sup> applies to subject matter as well as to method and external form."

"*This*<sup>5</sup> is a failure common to periodical writing." [Can the *absence* of impassioned energy be a *failure* ?]

All three examples are found within ten pages, and the whole volume is full of similar instances. Thus, among the merits of Johnson's style is "(2) Literary Gravity," and we are informed about it that "*the reference here* is not to that excessive seriousness of manner which often ended in confirmed melancholy but to that sober habit of mind and expression which was based on his view of the writer's vocation."

The same writer, (who, let it be said in justice to him, can write and has written not a little unimpeachable English), is fond of long series of those excessively short sentences which Coleridge condemned as "purposely invented for persons troubled with the asthma to read, and for those to comprehend who labour under the more pitiable asthma of a short-witted intellect." Thus, "The limits of his [Johnson's] life were too narrow to admit of much diversity. His style was affected by these circumstances and especially *in the line of* [!] want of adaptiveness to all classes and phases. His method was rigid and mechanical and the same to all. He would talk to Goldsmith and Savage and the artisan in the same manner. Whatever the topic might be, the treatment of it was the same. The narrative, [*the*] descriptive, [*the*] didactic and [*the*] critical were all run in the same mold and branded with the common mark. They are all in the phrase of Macaulay, 'Johnsonese.' His prose style, as his body, was very much opposed to change. Starting in one direction and at a certain pace he maintained it to the end. In all this he was true to his nationality. In that he was lethargic, he was English. The phlegmatic element in him was native to the realm. The Gallic verve and sprightliness *was* [*sic*] as foreign to him as *it* was to his country. He was constitutionally and mentally heavy and could not face about at will. There are few scenes in literary history so amusing as *when* this ponderous man attempts

to be playful and unbend himself to passing changes. While he is unbending, the opportunity passes. *Here* [!] as in the case of diction, naturalness covers many sins. The very uniformity of his prose is natural. It is a fault and yet modified by the fact that it is purely individual and characteristic."

One is reminded of the criticism by Theseus of Quince's famous speech "for the Prologue," "This fellow doth not stand upon points."

So, Mr. Sweet, *Anglo-Saxon Reader*, p. xlv., finds it in his conscience to write, "Adjectives have the three genders of nouns, and *the same* cases, *with the addition of* the instrumental, *ending in e*, *which* only occurs in the masc. and neut. in the sing.: in the fem. sing. and in the plur. *its* place is taken by the dat.<sup>6</sup> *They* also have a strong and [*a*] weak inflection, the latter employed after the definite article and demonstratives generally." Can contempt for form go further? Or is this utter want of style merely an unconscious imitation (as the abbreviations are a conscious following) of the great German philologist Dr. Wittern-sieus?

Even trained theologians and preachers are not free from such blunders. Thus, in a recent most important contribution to the history of Christianity, I find the following slips (with many more) in the work, the style of which is in general by no means bad:—

"The statesman or [*the*] ecclesiastical politician whose object it was *not to attain* [=to attain not] martyrdom but triumph."

"The Greek fathers could not *escape* [*have escaped*], even *had they been inclined* to do so, from the influence of a philosophy like the Stoic."

"The truth of the incarnation as that which *can alone* [=alone can] meet the needs of speculative enquiry."

Surely, if such things are possible in the writings of authors of no little repute, it is time that some one raised his voice in behalf of a more careful, more conscientious cultivation of style. Nor is any author to be judged without mercy, who, no matter what his shortcomings in thought, has set us so illustrious an example of the importance and the effect-

<sup>4</sup> "The Want of Flexibility and Adaptation."

<sup>5</sup> "Absence of Impassioned Energy."

<sup>6</sup> The abbreviations are, of course, Sweet's.

tiveness of attention to points of style as Macaulay has set. Granting all that can be said as to Macaulay's mannerisms,—even conceding that he paid, perhaps, too much attention to mere form,—he remains a model of diligence, of "curious care" in expression, that we dare not despise, and in reading whom the young writer makes a very judicious start.

Should a philosophic basis be demanded for the position taken in this paper, it is not far to seek. Composition is an art, and in every art-process three elements enter,—matter, or content; form, or style; and purpose, or end in view. Granting that of these three the first is chief, does it follow that the others or either of them is of no account? How is it in music, in painting, or even in the technical arts, such as engineering? Shall a painter, because he has a noble picture in his mind, daub it on his canvass, so that we must struggle to discover his thought or his purpose? Is Wagner or Beethoven the greater musician? Browning or Tennyson the greater poet? Which has most clearly set out to less gifted mortals the God-inspired blessings of sound or thought with which his own soul was enriched and exalted? It can not be that with regard to art in general two opinions can prevail on this subject: why should we be able to entertain them with regard to the particular art of composition?

It is quite possible, then, to overstate the chief importance of having something worthy to say,—to state it, indeed, as if it were the only important element of composition. The truth is that success in all particulars is desirable; that Macaulay (for example), whose defects are mainly in matter, is culpable only in another way from that in which Carlyle is to blame, whose defects are in style, and in still another way from that in which De Quincy is wrong, whose defects though in style, are not the same defects of style as Carlyle's. Indeed, if a strict inquiry be made, the purpose of discourse, its moral character, would seem to over-shadow even the having something worthy to say. Many a writer has made shipwreck solely because his work has seemed to lack unity or definiteness of aim, so that his readers, like lost children or Spenser's travellers wandering in Error's den, have

scarcely been able to find their way. On the other hand, no writer is wholly useless who illustrates for us one or another of the elements of good composition. Nay, more; in our day, though a revival of the grand manner of the last century is not desirable, a protest is quite in place against the indifference to manner, the undisguised contempt for it, that seems to be a prevailing affectation among us.

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## MODERN LANGUAGES IN THE UNIVERSITY OF FRANCE.

### II.

#### 3.—L'ENSEIGNEMENT SECONDAIRE DES JEUNES FILLES.

Colleges for women are a rather new feature in the University of France; they were only created by the law of Dec. 21, 1880. While the president must be a woman, the teachers may be of either sex. The regular course of studies extends over five years and is divided into the *première période*, including the first, second and third year, and the *deuxième période* or *cours supérieur*, comprising the fourth and fifth. Outside of this course there may be organized a preparatory department, which would cover the instruction of the lower and middle course of primary schools required for entrance to the college course. The instruction of the first period is given in classes proper; that of the second, in courses uniting students of the same standing; the modern languages, however, hold an exceptional position, and are taught in courses throughout. The studies are either part of the instruction proper, or accessory exercises, or optional. The instruction proper bears a distinctively literary character; it is based on the French language and literature with the elements of ancient literatures, the modern languages, and universal and national history and geography, which have 52 recitations out of 71 throughout the course; the other 19 recitations are devoted to mathematics, natural science, physics, chemistry, morality, physiology, domestic economy, hygiene, law, and psychology. The accessory